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ABSTRACT

School psychologists can expand their role as consultant to students, school personnel, and parents by disseminating information about suicide ideation. This paper represents a replication of a previous study by two of the authors concerning knowledge about suicide among undergraduate university students majoring in education at a southern university. The current study surveyed a sample of both undergraduates and graduates in the School of Education at a northern university. Questionnaires concerning knowledge about suicide and attitudes regarding the role of teachers and school personnel in handling situations involving disclosure of suicide ideation were completed (N=113). One-way ANOVAs were calculated for responses to two scales comparing undergraduate and graduate students. Results from this study were also compared with those of the previous study. Open-ended questions were submitted for content analysis, which proved difficult due especially to an apparent lack of clarity about the meaning of confidentiality. The current study demonstrates that the need for more training among teachers is pervasive, rather than limited to the South or undergraduates. Both undergraduate and graduate education students lack important information for preventing suicides among school children. Confidentiality in particular was poorly understood. It is suggested that school psychologists train other school personnel and parents regarding suicidal behavior and the need for breaking confidentiality when there is a risk of suicide. (Contains 10 references.) (EMK)

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# Schools Linking with Family and Community Resources to Prevent Suicide

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## ABSTRACT

School Psychologists have been encouraged to expand their role beyond assessment and towards the role of consultant for both school personnel and parents (Hughes & Deforest, 1993). Furthermore, Stedman and Stapley (1996) suggested that an important area for disseminating information is suicide ideation. The purpose of the present paper is to replicate Stedman and Stapley's (1996) study of knowledge of suicide among undergraduate University students who are majoring in education. The current study surveyed a sample of both undergraduates and graduates in the School of Education in a northern University. We suggested previously that school psychologists take a consulting role in order to share their knowledge about suicidal behavior. Based upon this questionnaire study of 113 participants, there are consistent indications of a need for more training for teachers regarding suicidal behavior, especially concerning their knowledge about referring students to appropriate community resources for dealing with suicidal thoughts. There were no significant differences between undergraduate and graduate students on either knowledge of suicide scales.

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The current study demonstrates that the need for more training among teachers is pervasive, rather than limited to the south or undergraduates. Thus it is suggested that School Psychologists train other school personnel and parents regarding suicidal behavior and the need for breaking confidentiality when there is a risk of suicide.

School Psychologists have been encouraged to expand their role beyond assessment and towards the role of consultant for both school personnel and parents (Hughes & Deforest, 1993). Furthermore, Stedman and Stapley (1996) suggested that an important area for disseminating information is suicide ideation. Rather than offering suicide prevention programs for teenagers in the public school system as is the most common practice (Vieland, Whittle, Garland, Hicks, & Shaffer, 1991), School Psychologists could train parents and school personnel, especially teachers, regarding management of suicide issues.

Disseminating information to school personnel, as opposed to delivering training directly to the students, might be a more effective means of addressing the problem of suicidal ideation among students. Vieland et al. (1991) found no evidence of effectiveness in an 18-month follow-up study of a program which disseminated information directly to students.

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Shaffer, Garland, Vieland, Underwood, and Busner (1991) also suggested that there might be deleterious effects of programs aimed at students. For example, a few students felt that participating in the suicide prevention programs had actually increased the problems they were having and there were also indications that participation increased the likelihood of students viewing suicide as a possible solution to their problems.

The purpose of the present paper is to replicate and extend the findings of Stedman and Stapley's (1996) questionnaire study of knowledge of suicide among students enrolled in teacher education training programs. Questionnaires concerning knowledge about suicide and attitudes regarding the role of teachers and school personnel in handling situations involving disclosure of suicide ideation were completed by 200 female and 47 male volunteers for this study. The respondents were mostly in their third or fourth year of an undergraduate program in teacher education at a large southern university and ranged in age from 19 to 49 years (M=21.4).

Stedman and Stapley's (1996) data revealed that while most participants felt that the issue of suicide should be of great concern to school personnel, only 110 of the 247 participants felt that the amount of education which they had received regarding the issue of suicide during their teacher training to date had been adequate. They pointed out that confidentiality had been particularly poorly understood by their respondents. Responses to an open-ended question "Do you feel that school personnel (principal, counselor, psychologist) should break confidentiality in situations involving suicidal thought?" were difficult to

content analyze because many participants contradicted themselves and appeared to not understand the meaning of confidentiality. 13% responses were uncodeable and 27% said that school personnel should not break confidentiality in such a situation.

Thus, Stedman and Stapley (1996) suggested that there was a need for more teacher training regarding suicide ideation. The respondents displayed a lack of knowledge regarding confidentiality of student self-disclosure, which could have serious consequences.

It is critical that teachers, as the personnel who have the most contact with students, understand how to handle a situation in which either a student self-discloses or a student reports that a peer has demonstrated suicidal behavior. Kalafat and Gagliano (1996) stress that one of the most important outcomes of suicide prevention education aimed directly at the students is that there is an increase in the number of students post training who way that they would tell an adult. Thus, all professionals within the school setting need to be aware of potential risk factors and the need to refer to trained suicide prevention personnel.

The purpose of the present study is to replicate the questionnaire procedures used by Stedman and Stapley (1996) with a different sample. The sample for the present study is drawn from a northern university and includes graduate students, most of whom are already teaching, as well as undergraduate teacher education majors. It is hypothesized that the graduate students will perform

better on two scales of knowledge of suicide ideation as opposed to the undergraduate students.

## Method

### Participants

The current study surveyed a sample of both undergraduates and graduate students in a northern University to extend the database beyond the southern undergraduate sample previously examined (Stedman & Stapley, 1996). 113 volunteers (26 males and 87 females) ranging in age from 20 to 49 years (M=26.39) participated while enrolled in education courses.

Only 4% of the participants were freshman or sophomores. Forty-five percent of the participants were juniors or seniors and the remaining 51% were graduate students. Almost all of the respondents (94%) had experience working in schools. All participants completed informed consent forms and were debriefed.

### Materials

Questionnaires concerning knowledge about suicide and attitudes regarding the role of teachers and school personnel in handling situations involving disclosure of suicide ideation were completed. Instruments that had been developed for the Stedman and Stapley (1996) study were used. The "Facts or Myths Scale" contains 12 forced choice items based upon commonly held misconceptions about suicide to which the participants could respond either "agree" or "disagree". The second scale, "Factors Associated with Suicide

Ideation" contains 19 items utilizing a likert type format in which 1 indicates that the respondent feels that this factor greatly decreases the likelihood of a student engaging in suicide and 5 indicates that he or she feels that the factor greatly increases the likelihood of a student engaging in suicide.

Students also filled out a short demographic questionnaire and responded to some open-ended questions about the topic of suicide ideation and the responsibilities of school personnel. Answers to the question "Do you feel that school personnel (principal, counselor, psychologist) should break confidentiality in situations involving suicidal thoughts?" were content analyzed.

Procedure

Data were collected from participants enrolled in summer session classes through the School of Education at a northern university. Prior to taking part in the study, participants were asked to read and sign an informed consent form describing the nature of the study. They were also informed that they could halt their participation at any time if they felt uncomfortable and did not wish to continue with the study. The questionnaire packets were administered by the regular classroom teacher, in a group setting, during the regular class period, and took approximately 15 minutes to complete. Upon completion of the packet, participants were debriefed, thanked for their participation and were told that the results of the study would be available upon request.

## Results and Conclusions

The results of the present study support the previous questionnaire study of teacher education majors (Stedman & Stapley, 1996) in that most participants

(81%) felt that the issue of suicide should be of great concern to school personnel yet only 51% felt that the amount of education which they had received regarding the issue of suicide during their teacher training was adequate.

As was previously found, confidentiality in particular was poorly understood. Many responses to the open-ended question on confidentiality indicated indecision about handling the issue. Thirty percent of participants indicated that they would NOT break confidentiality. Many suggested that they would try to handle this critical issue on their own first and would only make a referral if they felt that they weren't making any progress.

A comparison of the results from the southern undergraduate study and the northern undergraduate and graduate study revealed similar performance on the two questionnaires, which assess knowledge about suicidal behavior. The mean score on the "Facts or Myths" scale was 8.9 out of 12 items (SD=1.5) which replicates the previous results. In both studies, the item missed most frequently (78% got it wrong in the present study) was "If a student does commit suicide the school should hold a memorial service".

Participants' performance on the second scale, "Factors Associated with Suicide Ideation," was also similar to the previously published findings. The mean score on this scale was 76 (SD=6.1) out of a possible 95 points.

One way ANOVA's on the two suicide information scales, the "Facts or Myths Scale" and the "Factors Associated with Suicide Ideation Scale" by graduate versus undergraduate status were computed. There were no significant effects of student status on either scale ($F(1, 107) = .354$ $p > .05$;

$F(1, 84) = .005$ $p > .05$, respectively).

The current study demonstrates that the need for more training among teachers is pervasive, rather than limited to the south or just undergraduate teacher education majors, or one particular sample. Although it has been widely noted (e.g. de Groot, 1994) that memorial services and eulogizing those who have committed suicide is a risk factor for copycat suicides, the current study replicated the finding that most students in teacher training programs are not aware of this fact.

One major focus of teacher training should be the risk factors and warning signs of adolescent suicide. There are developmental and gender differences in manifestation of depression among adolescents which make it difficult for parents and teachers to know when there is a serious problem (Stapley). Furthermore, Peterson, Compas, Brooks-Gunn, Ey, and Grant (1993) pointed out that suicidal adolescents do not necessarily even demonstrate symptoms of depression. It is important therefore, for teachers to be aware of risk factors such as appearing happy after a bout of depression or the suicide of a fellow student, of which many are not aware. If future teachers are not receiving adequate training on this critical subject, then in-service training needs to be provided.

The most crucial area from training appears to be the need for breaking confidentiality when students self-disclose and following up with appropriate referrals. Guetzloe (1991) suggested that school personnel should both refer students at risk to appropriate community resources so that students and their families can receive the expert services they need. Teachers should be trained

that their most important role is to do a referral. Misunderstandings regarding the need to break confidentiality when there is a threat of danger to self could have dire consequences.

Suicide among school-aged individuals is a serious problem. In the United States, suicide is the fastest growing cause of death among adolescents (Malley & Kush, 1994). Currently, suicide is the third leading cause of death among young people ranging in age from 15-24, according to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (1997). With this rapid increase of adolescent suicide, it is also important to note the responsibility of the school personnel to take the appropriate actions.

According to deGroot (1994), as school personnel take on more personal interaction with students, their legal liability is rapidly increasing. Beyond legal liability, school psychologists should follow American Psychological Association ethical standards. According to APA guidelines, confidentiality should be broken whenever an individual discloses information indicating a possibility that he or she may do harm to self or others. Since the data from both the Stedman and Stapley (1996) study and the present study indicate that participants currently enrolled in teacher education programs display a lack of understanding of confidentiality issues and teachers are the school personnel to whom students often self disclose the key topic school psychologists should cover in their consulting role would be ethical duties regarding situations which may result in harm.

School Psychologists should function as consultants to both school personnel and parents in helping them to become aware of risk factors for suicide and providing links to key community experts trained to handle suicidal behavior. Using APA guidelines as a model school psychologists should stress that the most helpful thing that teachers and other school personnel can do for a student who self discloses suicide ideation is to refer him or her to an expert in the area. Confidentiality should be respected whenever possible, but never given higher priority than suicide prevention.

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